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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000339

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/REA, NEA/PI, H

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KWMN ECON KU

SUBJECT: (C) FOREIGN MINISTER TELLS STAFFDEL ABRAMOWITZ

REFORM MUST BE GRADUAL

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Frank C. Urbancic, reason 1.4(d)

1.(C) A visiting staff delegation from the House International Relations Committee (HIRC), led by Democratic Chief Counsel David Abramowitz, met Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammed Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah January 10 to discuss political, economic, and educational reform efforts in Kuwait. Dr. Mohammed relayed warm greetings to "friends" HIRC Chairman Henry Hyde and HIRC Ranking Member Tom Lantos on behalf of the Kuwaiti people. He assured the delegation that the GOK remains committed to reform but stressed that reform must be gradual in order to build consensus and win parliamentary support.

(C) Women's Suffrage

2.(C) Dr. Mohammed outlined a three-pronged GOK strategy to build domestic support, particularly within the National Assembly, for women's political rights. (Note: An Amiri decree granting women full political rights in 1999 was defeated in the National Assembly by just two votes. End Note). "We didn't do our homework" at that time, the FM admitted. This time, he said, the GOK is being more thorough to make reform "more palatable" to the National Assembly.

(a) The GOK is working to amend the Municipality Law to allow women the right to vote and run for office at the municipal council level. By starting at the municipal level rather than a direct push for women's suffrage at the national level, the GOK hopes to "neutralize" parliamentary opposition to the idea from Islamist members, who occupy 15 out of 50 seats in the current National Assembly. (Note: Many Islamist members hold that Islam prohibits women from wielding political power; municipal affairs are viewed as local issues, however, so inclusion of women in governance at the municipal level would raise their profiles without rising to a level the Islamists might oppose. End Note).

(b) The GOK has asked the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs regarding Islamic jurisprudence on women's suffrage. The GOK is confident, Dr. Mohammed said, that the Ministry's answer will be that Islamic law is inconclusive on the issue, and that it is therefore up to "the leadership" of the country to decide.

(c) Meanwhile, the GOK has already decided to appoint and assign female Kuwaiti diplomats overseas to enhance the public position of women. (Note: Kuwait has only one female Ambassador at present. Out of 10 new senior GOK political appointments in 2003, none were women. End Note). Dr. Mohammed said the GOK is confident that this gradual, consensus-building approach to women's suffrage will encourage broader public support for the cause. He said it is "ironic" that Kuwaiti women continue to lack political rights yet play a pivotal role in business, civil society, and other areas. He did not specify, however, if or when the GOK plans to re-introduce a women's suffrage bill to the National Assembly. (Note: Women's rights activists remain skeptical of the GOK's intentions and depth of commitment to the women's suffrage issue. An outspoken activist who met with the delegation later in the day discounted the GOK's strategy as insincere. On the face of it, however, it appears to be a compromise way forward. End Note).

(C) Privatization

3.(C) On the economic front, Dr. Mohammed stressed that privatization of state-owned industries, including petroleum, is a key GOK long-term goal. However, he explained that many GOK officials, parliamentarians, and others remain skeptical of the benefits of privatization. The GOK will engage the National Assembly and others, he added, in broader dialogue on privatization in order to minimize fears of unemployment and other adverse effects on Kuwaiti society. The GOK is considering development of new laws, consistent with efforts towards privatization, against monopolies and excessive concentration of wealth, such as a progressive corporate tax structure and other safeguards to ensure that privatization benefits outweigh short-term losses.

(C) GCC Summit Developments

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4.(C) Dr. Mohammed told the delegation that the GOK is serious about substantive educational curriculum reform and pointed out that an astonishing 50% of the leaders' discussion at the December GCC Summit focused on this sensitive issue. He did not, however, offer details on GOK efforts to date to reform Kuwait's educational curricula. Regarding the Summit, he outlined key developments including the approval of the Arab Anti-Terror Agreement, and progress in discussions on a common currency and trade area, rail links, and labor liberalization: GCC Customs Union was established in 2003; the GCC is on track to become a free trade area in 2007, and plans to introduce a common currency by 2010.

(C) Saudi Reform

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5.(C) The delegation asked Dr. Mohammed for Kuwait's view on political reform efforts in Saudi Arabia. Dr. Mohammed said that the key to reform in Saudi Arabia is not to reduce or eliminate religious teaching and information but rather to ensure that the content of such teaching advocates progress, tolerance, freedom, and openness. He argued that Islam has been "hijacked by terrorists" and taken "out of context" to justify extremist views. He supports Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's national dialogue efforts to "galvanize" the Kingdom's "silent majority" within the Islamist movement to "reclaim" the true religion. He cautioned, however, that reform in Saudi Arabia will be very slow and gradual because of the Kingdom's unique position as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, and because the Saudi people are much more conservative than the regime.

6.(U) Staffdel Abramowitz did not clear this message.

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